THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

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Biography and Autobiography

"STAND on the boulevards today and you may see a Francis go by. He may be travelling fast, himself at the wheel with a blonde girl by his side. He is the athletic type, the lithe attractive male, broad-shouldered and thin-legged, with his hat raked at the jaunty angle of a military cap. His life, the joy of life, glints as he flashes past, maybe on his way to Mont-Oriol. He is a type of Frenchman not yet extinct nor likely to be extinct for centuries.

"Those who wish the ampoule to be opened and a gallant like this to be annointed once more at Rheims, with the oil that the dove brought from heaven, do not choose to see him as a human being as much as a King, a mysterious throb in a force that streams from the Eternal. They think it vulgar to see a blonde at his side; history should be blonde-proof. History may select the facts, but they must be worthy of History, must be dignified."

These are the opening paragraphs of a distinguished biography of Francis the First by Francis Hackett. In the volume Mr. Hackett attempts to evaluate his subject as typical of many modern Frenchmen, and to show through his life, a great portion of the psychology of France today. Certainly these opening sentences assure the reader that a fascinating account of the famous French ruler is in store for him if he reads the pages of the book.

Strictly speaking, however, a biography is a literary composition relating the life of an individual. This idea of writing such an account for the express purpose of telling all one can about the person's life and character is comparatively new. For although the old biographers, including Plutarch, sketched the lives of their subjects, they also had other motives, Often they took advantage of the opportunity to air their views on moral philosophy or politics or religion.

Real biography began about the time of Henry VIII. One of the earliest accounts written was the *Life of Sir Thomas More,* followed shortly by George Cavendish's life of Cardinal Wolsey, a brilliant portrait of an extraordinary personality. Among the greatest English biographies are James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and J. G. Lockhart's *Life of Sir Walter Scott.* Washington Irving's *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* is a famous early American biography.

In recent years, however, a new type of biography has come into vogue, highly selective in its presentation of facts and frankly giving the author's interpretation of his subject. Its leading exponents are Lytton Strachey in England, André Maurois in France and Emil Ludwig in Germany. These men, in particular, do apparently what George E. Woodberry suggests, when he says that "biography succeeds best when the subject of it and the circumstances of his life and the events of his career are described with the closest approximation to imaginative methods." Such a presentation of a man will make him live as vividly as the character in a good novel.

It is interesting to note the difference in the spirit of biography in the nineteenth century compared with that in our twentieth century. In accordance with the earnestness which characterized the Victorian Age, the death of every eminent person was followed closely by an authorized biography, executed with loving care either by a close relative or by an intimate friend. The subject was treated in a cold fashion; he usually was born on the first page and he died on the last page. About it all was a reverential attitude, an eulogistic attempt to set down only those features of his life that were wanted to be known. Skeletons, if any at all, were pushed into the darkest corners of a closed closet, never to be taken out and aired. The result was a life sketch of a mythical saint-like personage, one far removed from the toils and problems of daily life and actual experience.

With the beginning of a new realism, however, after the turn of the century, biography took on a far different appearance. For example, the near great as well as the great men were furnishing biographical material for the authors; minor figures in the history of art, music, literature and statesmanship were subjects of interesting articles. All, apparently, that seemed to be needed, was the picturesque and the sensational. Often, an obscure or shameful part of a man's life was brought to light, and unfortunately was treated out of its proportion to its full value. This phase of the new biography had an early start, and still is in existence; but it does not indicate the quality of all biography today. The new biography is distinguished from the old, however, in two chief aspects. In the first place it shows a marked degree of the new scientific spirit; and secondly, it employs an entirely different technique.

Scientifically it demonstrates the necessity of careful and exhaustive scholarship in research, and on the part of the author requires intellectual detachment. He must not possess, in painting the word picture of

his subject, entertain emotional bias of opinion; instead he must treat him in a mentally detached attitude from the standpoint of modern psychological knowledge. His must be an accurate search for truth, so that his pen picture will not contain any of the elements governed by tradition.

In technique the Victorian biographies were mere documents. On the other hand our modern biographies are works of art, stories carefully spun following hours of honest research. They are the result of the author's power and ability to select certain details and to interpretate these details after the selection.

Regardless of the exhaustive work of an author, there is no such thing as a complete life of a man—complete, of course, in that it tells everything. A biography is complete if it presents the important details of a man's life, and if those details are interpreted by the author. The element of interpretation, no doubt, is the very reason for recent publication of biographies about men who made dull reading in the form of old biographies. Their lives have been reinterpreted in terms that arouse our interest and curiosity.

Two prominent European writers, already mentioned, were pioneers in this type of writing and deserve mention in any article about biography. They are André Maurois and Lytton Strachey. Maurois, a Frenchman, possesses considerable knowledge and interest in English literature. With his publication of *Auriel, Life of Shelley* (1923) and *Disraeli* (1927), he established himself both in Europe and in America as a first rank biographer. His books are written in a highly novelized form, making excellent reading. Strachey, equally as well known as Maurois, is an Englishman, and is best known for his *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and his *Queen Victoria* (1921).

One of the best American biographers—at least America claims him since he gained his literary beginnings on the editorial board of the *New Republic*—is Mr. Hackett, whose *Francis the First* is quoted on the opening page of this chapter. Born in Ireland, educated on the Continent, and now living and writing in Europe, his other most distinguished biography is *Henry the Eighth.*

Mr. Hackett writes with a vitality that often is overpowering, and he possesses that splendid quality of pulling his reader on from page to page with fascinated interest and absorbing curiosity.

Let us complete the opening picture of Francis.

"Yet observe this long-nosed personage with night-life in his narrowed eyes, eyes that have wept for the broken Virgin, eyes that have faced battle, caressed and lusted, heavy with cupidity, glazed with surfeit, once expectant as the sky of May. The curve of this personage has its own peculiar grace. But when you take him as the head of a European state, with millions in his power, his intrinsic character is too important in its tiniest detail to be veiled in obedience to power-historians who rule out the human being.

"The craft of ruling certainly glints in those incredible eyes. If he were just a Big Boy, a Big Bad Wolf on the boulevards, his character would be of human interest, in its own way. Make him King and it is of poignant social interest. Set him on the throne of the most powerful single nation of Europe. Endow him as a multimillionaire. Give him a strong army. Ask him to guide the nation with a handful of councillors, no representative assembly, no potent public opinion. Then require him to deal with the great surges of human vitality which make themselves felt both in religion and in the plain struggle for existence. What he is, what he inherits, how he feels both as man and King, become then of supreme significance for the Europe he has to mould during the full third of a century that he reigns."

No mention of biography is complete without a consideration for autobiography, which, strictly speaking is a literary composition in which the author tells the history of his own life. Generally, autobiography is a more sure way to get an honest expression of a vivid personality, for great biographies are most sincere and unconscious confessions. Pepys' *Diary,* for example, is purely unconscious confession, while Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* is admirably sincere.

The earliest one of the greatest works of this kind is the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, nothing more than a record of his conversion and of his intellectual and religious convictions. During the Renaissance Benvenuto Cellini wrote his *Autobiography,* in which he revealed not only himself but also the characteristics of his period. Probably one of the finest of American autobiographies is *The Education of Henry Adams.*

Often the question naturally arises: Why read biography? The answer, equally natural, is simple. In biographical presentations of the great and the near great one not only sees the man as he actually was but also finds him painted against the background of the times in which he lived; discovers both his good and his bad qualities; and leaves the book with a biographical, historical and literary consciousness that rarely can be found in any other volume. Biographical reading deserves more minute consideration from the reading public than it generally gets.

Noah ordered all of the animals out of the Ark at the Lord's command: "Go forth, be fruitful, and multiply on the earth."

He then made a thorough search to see if all had obeyed and found two snakes huddled in a dark corner.

"Didn't you hear the Lord's command?"

"Yes, but we're 'adders'!"

Did you hear about the girl that got married because her slip was showing?